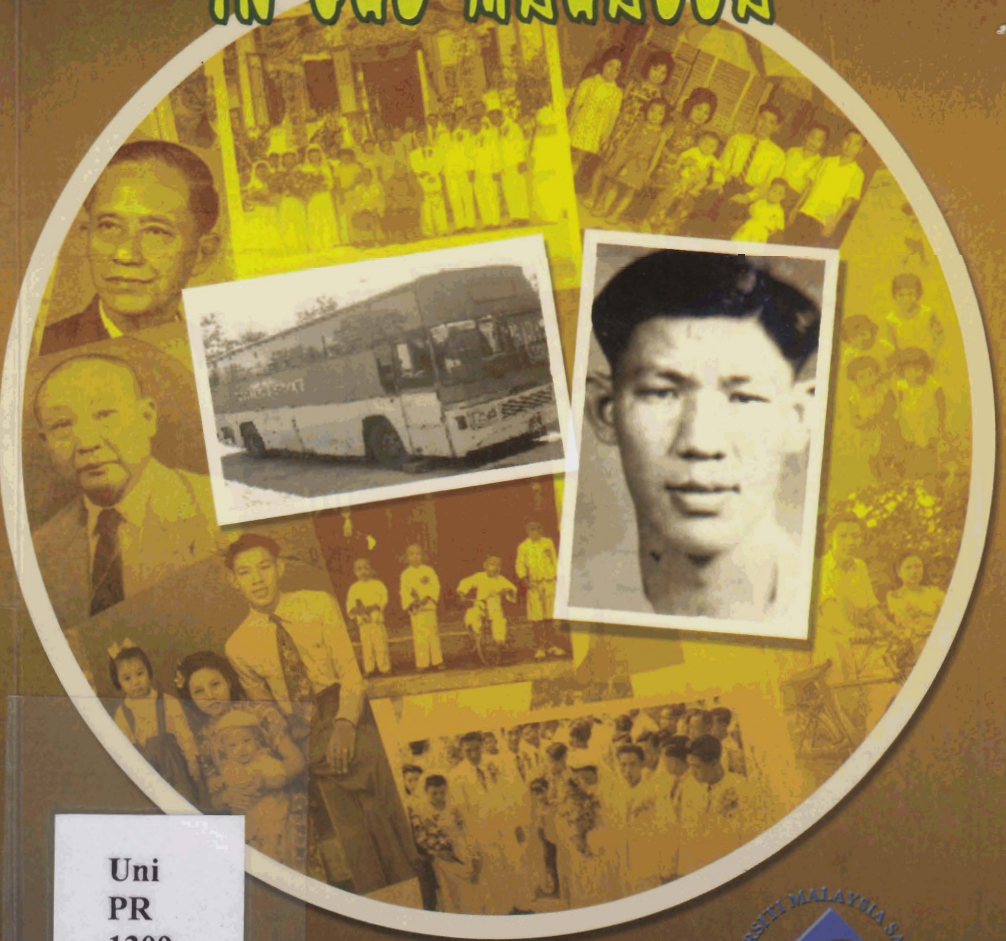


Children of a Bus Conductor:
**MUSINGS OF GROWING UP
IN OLD MALACCA**



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Ong Puay Hoon



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Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
2012

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FOREWORD

Yesterday is but today's memory, and tomorrow is today's dream (Kahlil Gibran). This quote by Kahlil Gibran truly speaks for this volume of childhood musings. Memories are the stuff of intangible cultural heritage – that component of cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions and stories, beliefs and knowledge systems, ceremonial rituals, music, poetry, songs, food practices, traditional games and crafts. Today's children (and adults) are living in an environment of 'highs' and 'fasts' - high technology, high speed, high consumption; fast food, fast gratification, fast life. They show an insatiable thirst to invent and re-invent, to compete and control. There is 'no time' to stop and look, contemplate and reflect on the changes and effects of their actions, inventions and interventions. There is also a lack of desire to know and learn about things that are seen as non-helpful to their quest for a better life.

We will not know where we are going if we know not where we are and where we come from. We need to take time off to retrace our steps and reflect on what we have done, what we are doing, and to contemplate, in particular, the importance of fellow human beings in our lives. History provides us the memories and experiences, as well as the platform to

develop a sense of place and belonging, to stand steadfast and courageously to face change, to accept the things we could change, and to come to terms with the things we could not change. The great sage, Confucius, embraced change for “only the very wise and very foolish do not change” (*Analects* XVII: 3). But in order for the change to be suitable and effectual, we have to contextualise the new with the old and consider how the old can serve the new: “He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge of the New is fit to be a teacher” (*Analects* II: 11).

This collection of twenty stories written under the theme ‘Children of a Bus Conductor’ provide readers a window on what it was like to be – yes, children of a bus conductor – in days’ gone by. In this modern-day world, many bus companies, in particular stage buses that service the town areas, have done away with conductors. Bus drivers nowadays act as both driver and conductor. Or, buses now have special ticket machines where passengers put coins into it and a ticket and change, if needed, will be dispensed by the machine without the driver having to go the length and breadth of the bus to collect fares.

The author, Ong Puay Hoon, who is my eldest sister, my *Ah Chi*, must either have a very good memory or have kept a

detailed written recording of her childhood experiences! For this, I salute her for this enduring perseverance in putting to writing her experiences of growing up in old Malacca. I delight in going back to our childhood days, and reliving our experiences staying with our paternal grandparents in Limbongan, spending our school holidays with our maternal grandparents in Bandar Hilir, and growing up (fights and all!) with our brothers, sisters, cousins, aunties and uncles on both sides of the family. Looking back through the lens of the stories narrated in this volume, I am grateful for the many lessons our interactions with our elders and family members, as well as friends and neighbours, have given us. Of course there were hard and tough times, but there were also beautiful and happy experiences that gave us the impetus to grow up and be, we children of a bus conductor - who we are, where we are, today.

The stories in this book are written in an engaging and enlightening manner, allowing the readers to feel and share the moments as if they were there. Readers will also be able to learn the traditional games, using handmade and improvised gadgets, that ‘children of a bus conductor’ used to play. Those were the days of low-tech and low consumption, but high-touch and high production (creativity in using resources from nature and from recycling)!

May this book inspire people to write their childhood stories, with the aim to reflect on lessons learnt, and at the same time, allow us to know our roots, and to come to terms with our past, and move on ...

Ong Puay Liu

1 October 2011

PREFACE

Childhood is the ground on which we will walk for our whole life.

Lya Luft, Losses & Gains

This book holds the musings of my early life in interesting old Malacca*. These personal narratives attempt to highlight the idea of how our history shapes us. As much as Malacca has become a part of me, I have become part of it in my own tiny way - part of its vast, complex human tapestry that was the history of the city. As history can be easily forgotten and before its essential fragments begin to disappear into the expanse of the past, the magic past of growing up in early Malacca needs to be retained. Author Harold Goddard wrote in *The Complete Shakespeare*:

*The destiny of the world is determined less by battles that are lost and won,
than by stories it loves and believes in.*

As parents everywhere, I am guilty of frequently recalling an item or two during times of disciplining my children with remarks like “When I was small,” I would be reminded that this has become too frequent by the rolling-up of their eyes and bored looks. Though my children have grown up and times of discipline and opportunities to pull forth a piece of history have naturally reduced, I ascribed by the motto ‘Better late than never’.

Hence, this small book of casual pieces of treasured memories that can explain where I have started, where I have come from as:

*This past.... is not a set of events over there....
at a distance from me,
but the atmosphere of my present.*

*Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
Phenomenology of Perception*

also aims to share them with readers, whose changing world presents growing-up experiences that are completely different from mine.

I thank Puan Norinda Su’ut and Encik Amzar Ashari for their support and patience and UNIMAS publication for publishing this book. My gratitude to my sister, Puay Liu, for writing the foreword and to Dr Gan We Ling for reviewing the manuscript draft.

To my beloved mother, father, grandparents, uncles, aunties, cousins, brothers, sisters, relatives and friends, living and departed, who have shared with me their time and love to carve these experiences that now become beautiful memories, words are unable to express my gratitude and love. Thank you all. To my loving husband, Kum Loy and beautiful children, Kher Lee, Kher Ching and Khai Meng, thank you for making my life complete and meaningful.

* old name for Melaka

Ong Puay Hoon
January 2012



In loving memory of
Ng Khai Thit

I will always love you
Whitney Houston

CHILDREN OF A BUS CONDUCTOR 1:

MY FATHER THE BUS CONDUCTOR

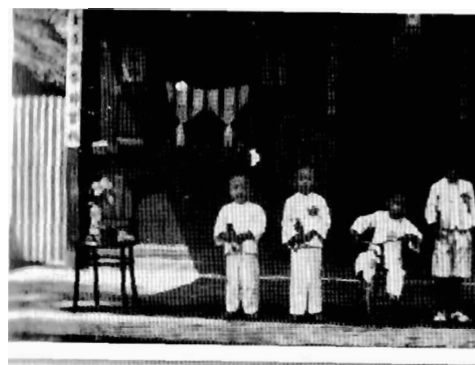
My father, Ong Boon Kiat, is the youngest son of three boys in the marriage between Ong Geok Chan and Yau Choon Neo. Boon Kiat was born on 7 May 1933. His father, Ong Geok Chan and whom I called *Kong Ah*, was a rubber plantation owner and landlord of many houses in Tangga Batu and Limbongan in Malacca. Boon Kiat's grandfather, Ong Poh Lan and whom I would call *Thai Kong* if still alive when I was born, left his *Oh Kut* village in Fukien Province, China in 1892 in a *tongkang* to seek his fortune in Malaya when he was 8 years old wearing only a blue pair of shorts and a red cloth as towel over his shoulder. *Thai Kong* arrived at Tanjung Keling, Malacca and found work selling water from house to house in neighbouring Tangga Batu carrying two heavy buckets of water slung on a bamboo rod over his shoulders. My mother said that then, *Thai Kong* survived on plain watery porridge with salted vegetables. Having no home, he slept

everywhere and anywhere with the red cloth doubling up as a blanket and mat.

Thai Kong scrounged and saved money to buy a bullock cart and a bullock to enable him to travel further and faster to sell water and later, rubber stems which he cut into blocks for firewood. At 16 years old and with his savings, *Thai Kong* returned to China to pay respects to his parents. He returned to Malacca to continue his water business. Recognised as a diligent businessman and honest businessman, the British government gave him some coupons to start another business selling cloths. As his mother had wanted, he returned home when he was 22 years old to marry. About one or two years after his marriage, he brought his wife, Lim Sah Neo, to Malacca.

This marriage was blessed with five girls and three boys (one adopted), with *Kong Ah* as the elder son (b.1909). The younger brother, who had some mysterious disease which flared out upon exposure to sun and who adopted one boy as his son and also took my father as his god-son, had died unmarried.

As *Thai Kong* allowed payment in instalments to his purchasers, his business flourished and he was able to buy about 200 acres of land around Tangga Batu and Sungai Udang. He built a house on a piece of his land in Tangga Batu which then became our ancestral house where his children, many grandchildren and later, some great grandchildren were born.



In front of
the ancestral
house in
Tangga Batu

L to R

My father, a
cousin, 2nd
Uncle (Dee
Pek Kong) on
a bicycle and
1st Uncle (Pek
Kong).

Thai Kong grew rubber trees on his land and the industrial revolution in the 1920s and 30s which provided great demands for rubber and brought much material benefits to many rubber planters. Like all good sons, *Thai Kong* sent money home to his parents to help develop his village. During the Japanese Occupation of Malaya in the Second World War, *Thai Kong* and others

who had ties with China were caught by the Japanese and beheaded at Tangga Batu. His remains, together with others killed by the Japanese, were interred at the foothills of Bukit Cina around the memoriam built to honour those who died at the hands of the Japanese. This memoriam is within the vicinity of the Hang Li Po Well or now called *Perigi Raja*.

My father's mother, Yau Choon Neo (*Tua Mah*), was the daughter of the esteemed family of Kapitan Yau Kim Swec. Eight months after giving birth to my father, she died of high fever. *Kong Ah* remarried a lady from the neighbourhood, Huan Keng Lian and whom we called *Mah*. They have a daughter, Ong Boon Kim, whom I called *Tua Kor*.



Ong Poh Lan
(Thai Kong)



Lim Sah Neo
(Thai Mah)



Ong Geok Chan,
younger
(Kong Ah)



Ong Geok Chan
(Kong Ah)



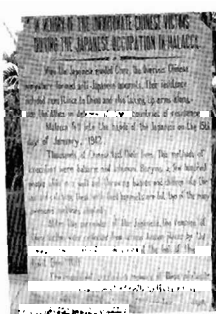
Yau Choon Neo in
her wedding gear
(Tua Mah)



Ong Geok Chan
and Huan Keng
Lian (Mah) in a
post-marriage
portrait



The Memorial in
Bukit Cina



Description in English and
Mandarin titled 'In Memory of
the Unfortunate Chinese Victims
during the Japanese Occupation
in Malacca'



When my father was four years old, *Kong Ah* moved his family from Tangga Batu to a rented house at Teck Chye Avenue, Tranquerah which is nearer to Malacca town. My father started school at Sekolah Kebangsaan Limbongan. When the Japanese invaded Malaya in 1942, the school was taken over by the Japanese. My father said he learnt Japanese and grew sweet potatoes and tapioca. Not much else was taught.

As the only surviving son, *Kong Ah* inherited the property of *Thai Kong* after his death at the hands of the Japanese. *Kong Ah* sold a big piece of land in Sungai Udang to buy a house and its surrounding land at Limbongan. The sold land is now the Terendak Army Camp.

The house, 2331 - C Limbongan, facing the Straits of Malacca, is where all my siblings and I were conceived and grew up, and where all these stories are based on.

After the Japanese lost the War and withdrew in 1945, my father was enrolled at St. David School for three years, and later, Chung Kuo (Chinese) School in Tranquerah for the next two years. While his brothers remained in the Chinese school, my father was transferred by *Kong Ah* to Methodist Boys School as English had become important and my father was a good student. It was said that my father's two elder brothers were not transferred as *Kong Ah* was afraid they might not be able to learn English.

Father called this new school, *Buffalo School*, as many of its students were big-sized and tall. In his second year in the school and 18 years old, discussions were made for the marriage of his eldest brother, then 21 years old. It was said that my *Thai Mah* (Great Grandmother) got an idea to marry all the three brothers on the same day. My father said that he did not know what being married meant then. He was taken by his father, stepmother and Fourth Grandaunt (whom I called *Lau Si Kor*) to City Park (near the then Federal Theatre) to take a first look

at his future bride. A Chinese opera show was on that night and his future bride was an ardent fan. My father, his entourage with the future bride and her parents had dinner together while making arrangements for the engagement and wedding.

My Father



My father with his teachers and classmates at Chung Kuo (Chinese) School



Engagement photograph of my parents



Ong Boon Kiat (my father)

The engaged couple (my soon-to-be parents) on a bicycle date in the park in Banda Hilir



A mass wedding was held for the three brothers on 26 November 1951, and my soon-to-be father, Ong Boon Kiat then at 18 years old, did not have a single sen in his pocket! My father's bride, Gan High Geok at 16 years old, second daughter of Gan Cheng Poh (*Gua Kong*) and Loo Suan Neo (*Gua Mah*) of Banda Hilir, would soon become our mother.

The 3 brides, from left: My mother, 2nd auntie, 1st auntie and Mah



Gua Tai Mah (Father's Gua Mah)

Lim Sah Neo (Thai Mah)

4th grand-auntie (Lau Si Kor) who match-made my parents

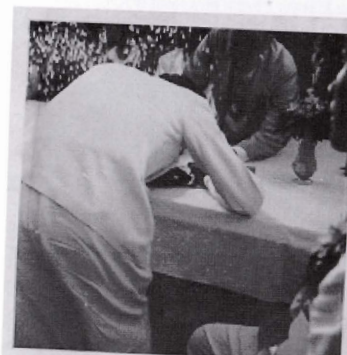
The 3 bridegrooms, from right: My father, 2nd uncle (Ong Boon Pin), 1st uncle (Ong Boon Loh) and Kong Ah



My parents

Dee Pek Kong & Dee Em

Pek Kong



My father signing his life away to his beautiful bride



The three nervous bridegrooms L to R: Pek Kong, Dee Pek Kong and my father



The wedding car



The wedding lorry to send dowry to in-laws

*My parent's
wedding room*



*The handsome
couple who
soon became
my parents*

After the wedding, father returned to school. A few days later, an office boy came to tell him that the Principal wanted to see him in her office. The Principal asked him if it was true that he was married. My father said yes, and was duly informed by the Principal that the school regulations did not permit any married student to be enrolled in the school. Father was asked to leave school and get a job.

As *Kong Ah* then was one of the shareholders in Malacca Town Bus Service, father was given a job as a bus conductor and he worked there for the next 22 years.

Such is God's greatness that He granted all first-born sons born one month apart to these three brothers: Ong Eng Khong, my eldest brother, *Ah Ko*, was born on 9 October 1952, Ong Eng Kian, son of *Pek Kong* (First Uncle) in November and Ong Eng Siong, son of *Dee Pek Kong* (Second Uncle) in December.



*My parents with
their first-born,
Ong Eng Khong,
Ah Ko and
adopted auntie,
Dee Kor*

CHILDREN OF A BUS CONDUCTOR 2:

AN EXTRA GAME TO PLAY

My father became a bus conductor as soon as he was asked to leave school when he got married at 18 years old. As a bus conductor, my father's job was to collect fares from passengers and to give tickets according to the fares. These tickets would be stapled according to denominations and mounted on a wooden board. They came in different colours according to the denominations, that is, one colour for 5 sen, one colour for 10 sen, one colour for 20 sen and one colour for 50 sen. Upon payment, the relevant ticket would be torn off, leaving a stub that would allow him to know how much he had collected for each denomination.

I cannot recall how these ticket stubs became our toys. It is as if my siblings, cousins and I, often with neighbourhood kids, had played with them as long as we could remember. We would drive nails through

these bundles of stubs to make holes so that we could tie them to a stick which became our ticket board. We would make paper money, sometimes from randomly torn-off pieces of newspapers and sometimes, deliberate tracing of coins with colour pencils which were then carefully and painstakingly cut out.

After the 'money' had been prepared, chairs would be arranged, either in single file or in doubles, depending on their availability. One of us would be the 'driver' of the bus, one would be the bus conductor and the rest took their 'seats' to be the passengers. The driver would, with his mouth, make the bus engine sounds which, to those familiar with bus rides, were distinctively loud and crunchy. Note the pronoun 'his'. Even in this innocent social play, subtle gender discrimination existed as I cannot recall any of us girls being allowed to be 'drivers'. Almost always, we were the passengers and only upon fierce argument, could one of the girls become the conductor.

The bus conductor with his/her ticket board would walk to the first passenger to ask for the destination and then collect the fare. "India", said the passenger, and to which the conductor would reply "20 sen".

The passenger would pay 20 sen to the conductor who would then tear off and give the relevant stub. The conductor would then go to the second passenger, "*Pigi mana?*" "China". "15 sen". "*Sini*, 50 sen". The conductor would give a 15 sen stub and return a balance of 35 sen. Usual destinations then were "Australia", "America", "Burma", sometimes "Mount Everest" and others. Not only were geography and mathematics learnt and applied, we even managed to simulate mega-supersonic travel of going round the world in a bus! We were practising "globalisation" even before the word came in vogue in the new millennium!

After 'travelling' for some seconds, the driver would stop and announce "Australia!" The Australia passenger would get off the bus. After the passenger had safely got off the bus, the conductor would yell "*Go..ead*" and the driver would rev his engine sounds and the journey would re-commence. At the next stop, the driver would yell, "Burma!" Why the bus went on an economically-taxing trip to Australia, then Burma, then America, then New Zealand, was nobody's concern. Often, the driver had to "*Go..stan*" (Go astern or to reverse) to make these looping trips.

Some 'drivers' might have dreamt of becoming F1 drivers because without warning, they would carry their chairs and bent sideways, shouting "*Korner! Korner!*" The passengers would scream and bent likewise in unison. Sometimes, the driver would yell off a "Bang! Cras...h...h!" "Accident! Accident!" and everybody would fall off onto the floor, and kicked/pushed the chairs down. If the "*Korner*" yell did not trigger an admonishment to be more quiet from my grandfather, "Accident!" would definitely get a red flag!

With warnings to be quiet to each other, chairs were righted and the game proceeded. Suddenly, the driver would give off a "Kr.ee.k, K..k..ru..uk, K..ra..aak" and "*Bas rosaklah!*" Passengers would moan and sigh and get off the chairs. This driver, who must have dreamt to be a mechanic, would open the 'bonnet' of the bus, tinker around, went under his chair to tinker at the 'engine' and after he was satisfied that the engine has been repaired, would happily announce, "*Bas OK, naik, naik.*"

After some time, which was never more than half an hour, we got tired of the game and some bright spark,

almost always my eldest brother, would suggest something and everyone would dump everything – the ticket board, tickets and 'money' and we ran off to play the new game. Now that I think of it, we never ever put the chairs back. What a headache we must have given to our mother and grandma!

If we wanted to play "Bus" again, we would make everything once again. Nobody suggested keeping the things to be re-used. We played whatever according to 'mood' or 'season'. If it was the '*guli*' (marbles) season, everyone in the neighbourhood would walk around with pockets full and heavy with the happy jingling sounds of many marbles rubbing against each other. Their sheer weight occasionally pulled down many-a-shorts, usually the boys', and no one seemed concerned about the baring of some flesh. If it was the 'rubber band' season, all would have the bands from their wrists to their elbows; if it was '*gasing*' (top playing) season, there would be busy sounds of sawing, sandpapering and sharpening of ends of nails to split enemies' *gasings* into two!

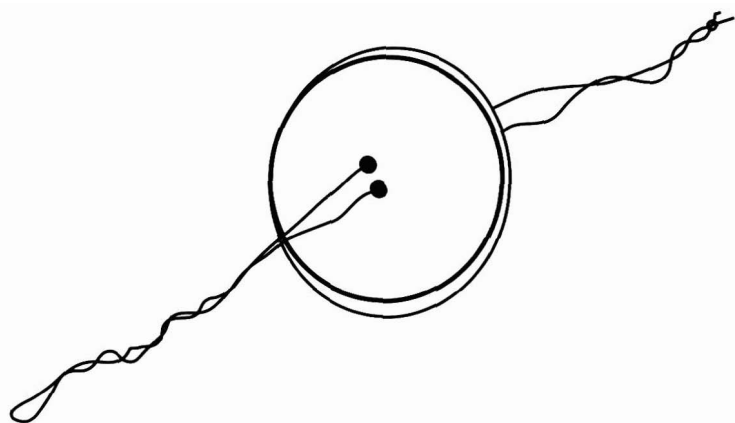
I especially loved the '*lastik*' season. Suddenly, *jambu* trees would get de-branched as everybody chose the

best-angled branch to make the '*lastik*' with rubber pieces from thrown-away bicycle tyres. Using tightly-folded papers as bullets, we would chase and shoot each other and occasionally, the poor cats and birds. Another favourite game which used rubber pieces from tyres was the shuttle-cock game. Either we pulled off the feathers from *Mah's* feather dusters or we crept into the chicken house to pull off the long tail feathers from *Mah's* cockerels which she reared for Chinese New Year. We had to make a speedy get-away as the loud painful cackles of the cocks would bring *Mah* running along with a cane. A nail would be pierced through the middle of a round piece of tyre (about the size of a 50 sen coin) and the feathers would be bound around the nail with rubber bands to make the shuttle-cock. It would be kicked with one leg or both legs and counts would be taken of the number of kicks the shuttle-cock remained on air. Often we would fashion out a shuttle-cock from a bunch of frangipani flowers tied together at their stalks with a rubber band.

We had our share of 'cigarette boxes', 'picture cards' and 'bottle caps' seasons too. Each playing child would 'donate', say 5 picture cards or bottle caps, and they would be stacked up in one high column in the middle

of a circle. After determining the order of play through the '*oh zum*' and rock-paper-scissors hand games, we would stand at a designated line drawn a few feet from the circle and took turns to use our slippers to hit the column. Those picture cards or bottle caps that were flung out of the circle became the hitter's. Another game using the picture cards was to 'hid' them (each player 'donated' a certain number of cards) among the pages of a thick book, usually the telephone directory. Taking turns, each player would flip open the book and any card there would belong to the player. We liked to roam the nearby *kopi tiam* for the metallic bottle caps of Coca Cola, F&N or beers which we would flatten with a stone or hammer. Two holes were then made in its middle and a piece of cotton thread No. 10 was looped through them. Holding the ends of this gadget, we then twirled the flat disc a few times and then stretched and relaxed the thread so that the disc spun ominously and would be used as a spinning 'guillotine' to cut the string of the opponent. This stretching and relaxing of the thread must be expertly maneuvered to maintain its spinning momentum. (My husband, Ng Kum Loy, who was born and grew up in Taiping, Perak said that he and his gang would flatten similar bottle caps and then placed them on the railway tracks so that the passing

train would sharpen the edges. This would make a more formidable weapon than the Malaccan's.)



Rubber seeds had been used as weapons—they became very hot after being scrapped on some hard surface and we would try to ‘burn’ someone’s skins. The seeds and ice-cream sticks would be fashioned into helicopters and there would be a game to see whose helicopters flew the highest or furthest. Beside the house, there was a big *nangka* tree whose yellow leaves would dropped and scattered around it. The leaves would be joined with small pieces of *lidi* (broomsticks from coconut frond) and fashioned into belts, armours, headgears, ornaments for the arms which we would decorate ourselves with and later, role-play as warriors and fighters.

When it was time for the ‘police and thieves’ game,

there will be busy sounds of sawing and sandpapering ‘guns’ all over the neighbourhood. Wooden boxes for condensed milk were most popular as sources of wood as they could be easily shaped and easily available as discards from the nearby sundry shops. The varied shapes and sizes of the constructed guns among the children were sheer astounding and say a lot on the young minds’ creativity. Young green cherries would be used as bullets, when shot out from the elastic rubber bands of the guns gave sharp and painful stings on the ‘thieves’. If all ‘police’ were shot by the ‘thieves’, the ‘thieves’ would become the ‘police’ and vice versa.

We were able to play many lawn games as our house had a huge and flat garden. One of our most-liked games was the ‘kala-katok’. There would be two teams and the rock-paper-scissor hand game would determine which team would start. An elongated hole was dug into the earth and a line was drawn a few feet in front of the hole. There would be 2 sticks – a shorter one (about 10 cm, termed the ‘flier’) and a longer one (about 20 cm, termed the ‘hitter’). The losing team would spread and strategize their positions beyond the line to catch the ‘flier’. The starting team would gather behind the hole and take turns to play the sticks. There were three levels

of increasing complexity of hitting the 'flier' – firstly, the 'flier' was placed perpendicularly across the hole and the player would use the 'hitter' to dig and push the 'flier' away as far as possible. If the 'flier' is caught by any member of the losing team, the player became 'dead' and could not continue. If the 'flier' was not caught and dropped on the ground, any member of the losing team would throw the 'flier' to be as near to the hole as possible. If the 'flier' was thrown at a distance shorter than the length of the 'hitter', the player became 'dead' or 'out'. If the 'flier' was thrown at a distance away from the hole, the player would use the 'hitter' to measure the number of its lengths from the place it landed to the hole. Next, the player would place the 'flier' at an angle on the mouth of the hole and hit its upper end such that the 'flier' flew up and using the 'hitter', would hit the 'flier' as far as possible. Again, if the 'flier' was not caught, it would be thrown back and any distance from the hole would be measured. If the player was still 'alive', she or he would proceed to the last level, that is, stand just behind the line and with one hand holding both the 'flier' and 'hitter' to throw up the 'flier' up into the air and hit it as far as possible with the 'hitter'. The total number of points (or lengths) would be the player's score. It would be the turn of the next

member of the starting team to play. There were two circumstances for the losing team to have its turn to play the sticks; when all members of the starting team became 'dead' or have played their turns. The team with the higher number of points would be the winner of the game.

Another favourite lawn game was the *hantugal* where lines are drawn on the ground. Here, there were also two teams and each team took turns to out-manuever the other team to run through the lines without being touched.

Then, it was 'fish' season and there would be frantic saving of money to buy aquaria, fishes and its paraphernalia. My brothers, especially my second brother, were crazy over black mollies, swordtails, angel fishes, pencil fishes, neon fishes, goldfishes of varied colours and sizes, guppies, fighting fishes and what else. My brothers would breed the fishes, especially the guppies, and I remembered being fascinated with the pregnant mothers and later, 'millions' of baby fishes which would be lovingly separated from the mother and other fishes into another vessel, usually Horlicks and jam bottles. This was to prevent the baby fishes from being eaten as food by the

other fishes including their mother. We would roam the ditches and streams around the vegetable farms that stretched from behind Limbongan to Lorong Pandan for those small worms that lived in clumps. With a piece of masterly crafted length of wire or with our fingers, my brothers would scour these worms which we would feed to the fishes.

During the windy season of November until December, kites would adorn the neighbouring skies abundantly with a significant number getting trapped on trees, roofs, overhead electricity and telephone lines. The kite season would be filled with cries of 'Ha..ny...ut...!' (floating away) and kids ran and chased after kites whose strings had been cut off by glass-coated strings of somebody's kite. My brothers, cousins and I would spend hours pounding glass bottles behind the house and coat our kite strings thickly with glass shavings to make the most vicious kite-strings in the neighbourhood. We would save money to buy no. 10 cotton thread as the kites' strings and persuade our mothers to give us the empty Milo and Glucose tins to wound our strings. This windy season is also the mating season for the dragon-flies. There would be lots and lots of dragon-flies flying around. My long-suffering grandmother, *Mah*, would be scolding us for

her slowly'disappearing *lidi* or sticks fashioned from coconut leaves from her brooms, which we would use to dip its ends with latex from young *buah cikus*. We would use these to catch dragon-flies by sticking them with the latex. By tying a thread at its tail, we would play with the poor dragon-fly until it either died of exhaustion or mutilation of its body. We would likewise play with the green beetles shaken down from the *Laegestromia* shrubs.

If it was the spider season, the boys and girls in the neighbourhood would search for spiders among the leaves of the *ciku* trees, *rambutan* trees, *nangka* trees, *pandan* shrubs, etc. We were able to spot potential nests of spiders; two leaves overlapping each other with the vein of one of two leaves creating a natural hollow for the spider. Delicately, we would manoeuvre the leaves or our head so that we could peek into the 'groove' to look for the inhabitant. If we saw a white-faced spider, Eureka! It was a male spider! The two leaves will be cupped with our hands and the lucky owner would quickly go to an empty spot to place the captured spider and its nest into, usually, an empty match-box. Only male spiders will "fight". When two males ready themselves for a "showdown", both

spiders would put their mandibles down and with their abdomens raised and cocked to one side, they then rushed at each other. Their mandibles will “clash” with the loser quickly making a quick retreat. There were no prizes but pride for the owner! If one male and one female spider are put together, the stance taken by the male would be different from a “fighting” stance. The male spider would approach the female spider with its two mandibles raised and vibrating! The most treasured ones were the ferocious big and hairy whites.

During the blooming seasons of *Flame of the Forest* tree in front of our house, there would be a game to hook stamens and see whose heads still remained strong. The girls would play with its young flower buds whose inner red lining of their skins would be used as *Pontianak* nails, and part of the sticky stems of stamens split into halves and ‘clamped’ onto the ears to become long and swaying ear-rings.

During raining times, we played a game called ‘*Tau Kok, Tau Hu*’, where we used the four pillars (or less, depending on the number of players) in the open but sheltered area of the house. *Tau Kok* is hard beancurd while *Tau Hu* is soft beancurd. The number of pillars

used would be one less the number of players. We did *oh zum* to choose the loser, that is, palms turned up or down at the count. The odd one out, or loser, would stay in the centre of the pillars while the rest took position at one person per pillar. The loser would call ‘*Tau Kok, Tau Hu*’ and everybody had to change pillars. The loser would try to rush to occupy one pillar. Anyone who did not change their pillar or was unable to find an unoccupied pillar, became the loser and had to do some funny antics as directed by the others, and the game continued. Sometimes, the loser would call out ‘*Tau Kok, Tau Kok*’. There should be no changing of pillars but if anyone was not alert and left their pillars earliest, would now be the loser and get ‘punished’.

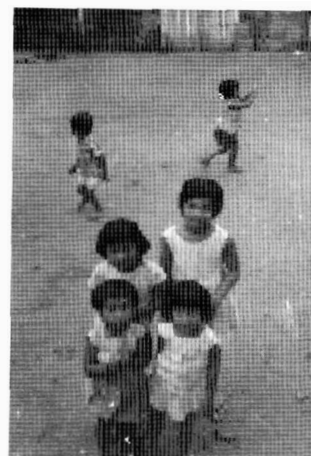
In the evenings with the strong and refreshing sea-breeze blowing in from the Straits of Malacca, my auntie, *Yen Kor*, (daughter of Ong Heok See, Lau Sah Kor) would take a big plate of rice and the day’s dishes and a spoon to feed all of us young children outside the house. We would sit on a long line on the stone chair beside the main road, Jalan Limbongan. Today, this road is still two-way as it was then. As my auntie fed one after the other down the line and up again, we played with the plate numbers of passing cars. Each

would choose a number from 0 to 9 and we counted the number of times this number appeared in the number plates of the passing cars. If I chose 5, and a car with the plate number MA9505 passed by either way, I would shout out 2, as the number 5 appeared two times. The winner would be the one with the highest score when the plate of rice was finished.

My eldest brother, *Ah Ko*, was always the leader in many of our games. He was quick to organize the teams and the rules of the games. We looked forward to his relays, where we would be divided into teams of 3 or 4 depending on the number of participating children, and raced around the *kampung* to pass the batons (sticks). His leadership trait led him to be a successful and highly respected teacher, disciplinary master and later, a headmaster.

And like the bus, we never kept the instruments of these seasons. I cannot remember throwing them away, but as each season approached, I remembered making or collecting them all over again.

We, the children and neighbours of a bus conductor, have had one extra game to play!



Taking a breather from their games for a photo

Front row:
Ong Puay Huay (cousin), Ong Puay Hioh (4th sister)

Back row:
Ong Puay Tee (3rd sister), Ong Puay Liu (2nd sister)



Ong Eng Khong (*Ah Ko*, the born leader) and his beautiful bride, Tan Jong Hua

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